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TAGS: PREL PGOV TU AM

SUBJECT: PUBLIC BANTER ON KARS AGREEMENT PUTS OSKANIAN ON THE DEFENSIVE -- AND ON THE RECORD

Classified By: DCM A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) An exchange in the press between Armenian Foreign Minister Oskanian and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has captured what we believe is the most public acknowledgment by the GOAM's MFA (under the administration of President Robert Kocharyan) of the validity Soviet-era border agreements. Responding to a local report citing Turkish daily Zaman's interview with PM Erdogan, Oskanian said on January 25 that the GOAM had never refuted the 1921 Kars Agreement nor had it signed international agreements that would reverse it. According to Oskanian's statement and local reporting, Erdogan prompted the official GOAM reaction by stating that, "If (the Armenians) don't recognize it, then we don't recognize it either." The local press took particular note of Oskanian's naming of the Kars Agreement, but kept editorializing to a minimum. Local (oppositionist) daily Azg made veiled comments suggesting that Erdogan's statement had been petulant, but would neither congratulate nor criticize Oskanian for his de facto recognition of the Kars Agreement.

¶2. (C) In conversations with us, MFA officials were upbeat about Oskanian's willingness to talk about the Kars Agreement by name. MFA Middle East Department Chief Karen Mirzoyan told us January 27 that "Erdogan's comment - and the need to respond - helped move us ahead." He noted that not since a less-direct mention of the Kars Agreement in 2001 by MFA spokesperson Szyunik Aghajanyan had the MFA been willing to talk about the issue in such specific terms. Mirzoyan suggested that a defensive posture at times helped the GOAM "air out issues" like the Kars Agreement, enabling them to gauge the latest reaction of both domestic politicians and counterparts in Turkey, while avoiding an appearance of "losing ground."

¶3. (C) Comment: Oskanian is already on record as stating that the GOAM has no designs on Turkish territory. While he has specifically discussed the Kars Agreement with the diplomatic community on several occasions (most recently in November 2004 during a convocation of Ambassadors resident in Yerevan), Oskanian's carefully-worded public acknowledgment goes farther than any previous statements about the recognition of borders in recent years. Most notable about the recent public exchange is the absence of push-back from extremist forces within the GOAM (including the Armenian Revolutionary Federation - "Dashnaksutyun") who normally decry anything they view as "conciliatory" to the Turkish side. Now that Oskanian has specifically named the Kars Agreement in public, we will watch carefully to see if it finds its way into public statements by other political leaders or if it elicits a reaction from official Ankara.

EVANS